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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of Education and various education commentators maintain that dropout rates have been decreasing for African-Americans and the school population as a whole. This paper presents evidence that dropout rates may be going up rather than down and identifies reasons for the conflicting data. The reasons include varied definitions of "dropping out," inaccurate reporting, and nonstandardized reporting procedures. Districts do a poor job of tracking students because of embarrassment, unrealistic accountability standards, and the tendency to overlook marginal students. Improved data-collection techniques are important because they help to assess the effect of increased resources, to compare school districts' performance, and to identify crisis communities. In addition, African-American students are probably most harmed by inaccurate dropout information. A single, understandable, and reliable indicator of student attrition is needed. A good start, although based on state self-reporting, is National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES) dropout data, which could be supplemented by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's method for reporting graduation rates by states. The recommendation is made for annual district reports on the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate on time. (Contains 27 references.) (LMI)

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SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES: ARE WE SURE THEY ARE GOING DOWN?

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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During World War I it was said that the British War Office kept three separate casualty lists: a false set to deceive the public, a second false set to deceive the War Cabinet, and a third false set to deceive itself (Horne, 1954).

Something similar might be said about U.S. dropout rates. The U.S. Department of Education and various education commentators maintain that dropout rates have been going down for African Americans and the school population as a whole. Unfortunately, multiple dropout definitions among states and school systems, inaccurate reporting, and a lack of standardized reporting procedures makes it difficult to know for sure whether this is true. In fact, there is disturbing evidence that in some settings at least, dropout rates are higher than is generally acknowledged and that dropout rates are going up.

Conventional Wisdom

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the nation's dropout rate has been coming down and has stabilized. In the 1994 edition of the Digest of Educational Statistics, the National Center reported that 11% of the population among persons 16 to 24 years old are high school dropouts, defined as persons who are not high school graduates and who are not enrolled in school. Among African Americans, the dropout figure for this age group is slightly higher--13.6%. This is a significant improvement

over 20 years ago, when 14.1% of the 16-24 year-olds were dropouts and 22% of the African Americans in this age group were high school noncompleters.

A higher percentage of urban youth drop out of school than the general population, but urban districts also report declining dropout rates. In 1994, the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) reported that annual dropout rates in the central cities had declined over a two-year period from 5.7% to 4.9 percent (1994a). Later that year, CGCS reported that 90% of its members reported a drop in their 4-year dropout rate over a one-year period (1994b). Annual dropout rates declined as well, averaging 4.9% for CGCS members in 1992-1993, only slightly higher than the national rate.

In general, educational researchers agree with the NCES and CGCS that the dropout problem is under control. Researchers for Sandia National Laboratories concluded in 1993 that the "on-time" graduation rate from traditional high schools has held at a steady 75% over 30 years (Carson, Huelskamp and Woodall, 1993).

A declining or stable dropout rate is particularly good news in light of the discouraging data we are receiving on the deteriorating condition of American children, especially in the inner cities. We know, for example, that the number of children born to unmarried mothers has grown to epidemic proportions over the past 20 years (Bureau of the Census, 1995), that the percentage of children living in poverty is going up, and that increasing numbers of children are exposed to violence, either in the home or their neighborhoods. If schools are improving their graduation rates in spite of these

disturbing trends, it is a tribute to the creativity and dedication of school leaders nationwide.

Moreover, declining dropout rates at least partly justify public education's rising costs. As Richard Rothstein pointed out, it makes sense for schools to have increased their spending over the past two decades, since they are retaining a larger percentage of children through the high school years (1993).

Disquieting evidence about the accuracy of dropout reporting

At the same time the Department of Education has been expressing optimism about school dropout rates, disturbing evidence is emerging that dropout rates may be going up, not down. In Ohio, for example, on-time graduation rates dropped from 77.2% in 1993 to 74.8% in 1994 (Candisky, 1995). And in Florida, state officials reached the puzzling conclusion that annual dropout rates were going down, but so were graduation rates. In 1994-95, 73% of the state's 9th graders graduated on time, a drop of 6 percentage points over five years (Wertheimer & Kennedy, 1995).

These are recent developments, but some commentators noticed declining graduation rates as early as the mid-1980s. In 1985, Harold Hodgkinson observed that the nation's on-time graduation rate had dropped over a five year period (1985). Hodgkinson predicted that high school retention rates would continue going down, due to rising numbers of at-risk youth.

In addition, several states saw their graduation rated decline during the 1980s. According to researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, the percentage of Florida and Georgia 9th graders who graduated on time went down between 1984 and

1988. (Firestone and others, 1991). New York's graduation rate dropped about 8 percentage points between 1970-71 and 1987-88 (University of the State of New York/State Education Department, 1990, p. 180). And in Louisiana, 66.5% of a cohort of 9th graders graduated on time in 1973, while only 56.1% graduated on time in 1993.

At the school district level, the evidence is spotty; but some urban districts began to experience declining graduation rates during the 1980s. New York City's graduation rate dropped from 60.3% in 1971 to 47.8% in 1988. In New Orleans, the percentage of 9th graders who graduated with their classmates dropped from 66% in 1973 to 46% two decades later. According to a recent newspaper report, Los Angeles' graduation rates have been declining over a 15 year period, beginning in the early 1980s (Shuster, 1995).

Long-term trends in GED program participation also suggest that high school graduation rates may not be improving. If the graduation rate was going up, we would expect to see lower participation in GED programs. In fact, participation is increasing. In 1974, more than nine out of ten persons received their high school credential from a traditional public or private high school. In 1993, high schools provided only 81.4% of the high school credentials. Almost one in five "high school graduates" was a GED recipient that year.

What counts for this conflicting data about dropout rates? A partial explanation has to do with the way dropout rates are defined. Optimists on the topic often rely on statistics provided by the National Center on Education Statistics. In its annual Digest of

Education Statistics, the Center publishes a "status" dropout rate--the percentage of people ages16 to 24 years who are not high school graduates and who are not in school. This method counts GED recipients as persons with high school credentials, including people who do not obtain a GED until they are in their early 20s. Since the 1970s, the status dropout rate has been dropping steadily; and it hovers today at around 11% (NCES, 1994).

The status dropout rate is useful for determining how many young people obtain a high school credential by the time they are young adults, but it does not measure how well school districts do in getting students through high school on time. The fact that a growing percentage of people receive high school credentials through a GED examination as young adults suggests that the percentage of youth graduating on time from traditional high schools may be declining.

Varied definitions does not account for all the confusion about the nation's dropout rates, however. Inaccurate reporting by school districts and nonstandardized reporting procedures also contribute to the problem.

First of all, there is no question that dropout reporting procedures are flawed in many school districts, undermining the accuracy of the reporting process. In a 1987 article, Margaret LeCompte and Stephen Goebel pointed out that dropout data were biased and skewed as a result of the way school districts collected and maintained them. Some progress has been made since then, but many districts continue to use flawed recording keeping procedures. LeCompte and Goebel recommended an auditing process be conducted in districts where dropout rates are not characteristic of

the populations they served. Districts with high minority enrollments and low dropout rates and districts showing great fluctuations from year to year should be considered suspect, according to these commentators.

Occasionally a school district's reported dropout rate is so wildly improbable as to be ridiculous. In 1993, for example, a Louisiana school district of 29,000 students calculated its annual dropout rate at two-tenths of one percent--only 22 students in grades 7 through 12 had dropped out of school. Since 37% of a cohort of 9th graders failed to graduate on time that year, the district's report was surely wrong. And the following year, the district's report was even more incredible. In 1994 the district reported that its dropout rate had declined to nearly zero--only 2 students dropped out.

A close examination of the Council of the Great City School's dropout analysis renders it questionable as well. In 1994, the Council reported that 90% of its member districts experienced a one-year decline in their 4 year dropout rates during the previous year. However, CGCS neglected to mention that more than half of its members provided no information on their 4 year dropout experiences. In fact, 10 of the 47 districts provided no dropout data whatsoever.

Several of CGCS's nonreporting districts are known to have extremely high dropout rates. Thus, it is quite possible that the dropout rates among the CGCS members are going up, not down, or that they are higher than the CGCS report indicated.

For example, the District of Columbia school system, which released no 4 year dropout rate to CGCS, had an on-time graduation rate of only 45% in 1991, lower than the average of any state (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1994). In addition, CGCS reported no dropout information for Philadelphia, which has an on-time completion rate of less than 50%, according to a New York Times report (Celis, 1995), and no dropout information for Detroit and New Orleans, other CGCS members with very high dropout rates.

But it is not only individual districts that are reporting inaccurate dropout rates. Some state-level reporting is inaccurate as well. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Louisiana's on-time graduation rate is the worst in the nation, but the state education department maintains that the state's annual dropout rate is only slightly above the national average. And a study of dropout rates in New Jersey urban schools found that rates published by the New Jersey Department of Education failed to reflect high student attrition rates in New Jersey's urban school systems (Burch, 1992).

In addition to inaccurate reporting, wide variations in the way dropout information is collected make it difficult to determine the true dropout situation. Again, the 1994 CGCS report provides illustrations. In that report, Chicago calculated its 4 year dropout rate at 45.2%, New York City reported a 15.4% rate, and Buffalo announced a figure of only 4.3%. All three districts have similar demographics--high percentages of minority children and children living in poverty. No one seriously contends that Chicago's dropout rate is three times higher than New York's or that the Buffalo rate is less than one-tenth that of the Chicago rate. These extreme

variations must be the result of different definitions and measurement techniques.

Likewise, several CGCS districts reported wide swings in their dropout rates over a one-year period. One urban district reported that its annual dropout rate declined by 60% in a year, and several others reported increases in the range of 50%. It seems unlikely that conditions in these districts changed so radically over a one-year period. These dramatic fluctuations are probably at least partly the result of changing dropout definitions or changing dropout tracking procedures.

Why aren't we doing a better job of tracking dropouts?

Our society would not tolerate the confusion about dropouts if the commodity being measured was money instead of children. Most school districts adhere to standard accounting practices when managing their fiscal affairs, practices that insure a high degree of accuracy. Why aren't we doing a better job of tracking students?

Embarrassment may be one reason. Dropout rates in the large urban districts are quite high, higher than many educators want to admit. Some districts have resorted to constructing obscure dropout definitions and measurement techniques to hide the fact that large numbers of students fail to graduate on time. Some districts count GED recipients to pad their graduation rates. Others allow students to enroll for a 13th and even a 14th year, which prevents them from being classified as dropouts.

Unrealistic accountability standards may also contribute to the problem. In the fervor of school reform, state legislatures and school

boards set lofty goals for improving student outcomes, often setting arbitrary deadlines for raising student test scores, improving attendance, or lowering dropout rates. In many cases, these deadlines are impossible to meet; and school leaders may tinker with measurement techniques or the definitions of student outcomes in order to improve otherwise bleak results.

Finally, some districts, particularly our hard-pressed urban systems, may unconsciously be engaging in triage (McClure, 1987). Overwhelmed by the large numbers of at-risk students--children with discipline problems, learning disabilities, and unmet emotional needs--educators may simply be concentrating on the ones they think will most likely be successful. Schools may be allowing marginal students to quietly slip away, or they may encourage some students to leave through suspensions, expulsions, and grade retentions. If this is the case, then it should not be surprising that the procedures for tracking these "lost children" are flawed.

Why does it matter?

Why is it important to get better information about graduation rates? There are at least three reasons.

Assessing the effect of increased resources. First, accurate dropout information is useful for assessing whether we are using educational resources wisely. The nation increased educational spending substantially over the past 25 years, and we need to know whether this money was invested wisely.

A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) illustrates how accurate information about graduation rates can be

helpful. According to the EPI report, real dollar spending increased an average of 61% in nine representative school districts during the twenty-five year period between 1967 and 1991 (Rothstein with Miles, 1995). In Los Angeles, the largest district in the EPI study, real spending increased 65% during this 25 year period. In Baton Rouge, the second largest district in the study, the real dollar increase was 53%.

The EPI report, which did not investigate graduation rates, suggested that U. S. school districts have made modest increases in education spending over a quarter of a century and have made modest progress in improving student outcomes. However, a look at long-term graduation rates in the cities that EPI studied might have altered that conclusion. In Los Angeles, graduation rates dropped from 63% to 52% from 1980 to 1990 (Shuster, 1995). In Baton Rouge, on-time graduation rates fell during the period of EPI's study--from 73% in 1967 to 62.2% 25 years later.

This disturbing finding does not mean that resources were expended foolishly in Los Angeles and Baton Rouge. On the contrary, the condition of children in these urban areas may have deteriorated faster than the districts could develop compensating interventions. Nevertheless, an accurate on-time graduation rate is useful information when evaluating the effect of increased resources on student outcomes.

Comparing school districts' performance. We also need accurate and standardized dropout information to compare school districts' performance with regard to student outcomes. Such comparisons

would be extremely important in this era of school reform and educational experimentation.

For example, Rochester City Schools, a district with high numbers of disadvantaged children, began a nationally publicized shared-decisionmaking initiative in the late 1980s. Now that this initiative has been in place for several years, it would be useful to know whether the reforms reduced the district's dropout rate compared to other urban districts with similar student populations.

According to the CGCS report, Rochester's annual dropout rate was 7.9% in 1993, considerably higher than New York City's 4.6% annual rate and the Buffalo district's 4.5% annual rate. But it seems highly unlikely that Buffalo and New York, with high numbers of impoverished students, have annual dropout rates that approximate the national average; and it seems even more unlikely that Buffalo's annual dropout rate is almost identical to its 4 year rate, which is what it reported to the Council of the Great City Schools. We can have no confidence that a comparison between Rochester's dropout rate and the Buffalo and New York rates would yield any useful information.

Identifying crisis communities. Finally, inaccurate reports may fail to identify school systems where dropout rates are quite high, lulling educators into believing that educational outcomes are better than they actually are. Particularly disturbing is the disparity between the dropout rates that urban districts acknowledge and the rates published by the media and other outside sources

For example, New York City reports a 4-year dropout rate of 15%, but a Phi Delta Kappan article put the figure at 56% (Goldberg,

1995). New Orleans acknowledged an annual dropout rate of 9.7% (Louisiana Department of Education, 1995), but 55% of a cohort of New Orleans 9th graders fail to graduate on time (Fossey & Garvin). Jersey City reported a 1987-1988 dropout rate of 12.7% to the state department of education. According to an independent study, the four-year drop-off rate for a cohort of 9th graders was 61% in 1988 (Burch, 1992).

The variation between dropout rates that school districts report and the rates reported by outside sources are not merely differences in definition--they often describe totally different realities. When on-time graduation rates slip to 50%, which is the case in many urban districts--Cleveland, Detroit, Hartford and Washington, DC, to name a few-- a serious problem exists. And when one considers that a third or more of the urban students who graduate from urban schools often fail to read at grade level, it is not too much to say that public education in the inner cities is in crisis.

What needs to be done?

To get better dropout information, public education needs a single, easily understood and reliable indicator of student attrition, one that would allow comparisons to be made among school districts in different states. Commentators have stressed the need for such an indicator for almost ten years (Williams, 1987, LeCompte & Goebel, 1987).

A good start has been made in this direction. Beginning in 1992, states have been reporting school-district level dropout information to NCES (NCES, 1995). Forty-three states provided

dropout information for the 1991-1992 school year, and 14 of those states sufficiently complied with NCES guidelines that their dropout data could be compared. Eventually, most if not all states will be providing NCES with standardized dropout information.

Even when this occurs, however, and it may be years before we have standardized dropout reports across all 50 states, we still won't know all we need to know about dropouts. Since the NCES dropout data is based on districts' self-reporting, we will continue to have problems getting accurate information. As the CGCS report on urban dropout rates shows, school district self-reporting is not always reliable.

Moreover, NCES reports the percentage of students in grades 7-12 who drop out of school in a given school year. While this is useful information, we also need to know the graduation rates for specific cohorts of students, and we need to be able to compare these rates among states and among districts in different states.

A good supplement to the NCES dropout data is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's method for reporting graduation rates by states. The Foundation compiles this information by measuring the percentage of each state's 9th graders who graduate on time four years later.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's measure has two attractions. First, it is difficult to manipulate, since the number of 9th graders and high school graduates is easily verifiable. Second, it gives a clear picture of a 9th grader's chance of graduating on time in each state. Its last report showed that in every state on the nation's southern border, the graduation rate was no higher than 70%.

If the Annie E. Casey Foundation's measurement was expanded from states to individual school districts, it would be possible to compare Los Angeles School District's graduation rate with New York's rate or rates in Rochester and Miami. As the CGCS report demonstates, this is not something that can be done now.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's cohort dropout rate would have some drawbacks if it were adopted at the school district level. A significant limitation is the fact that some students who leave school between the 9th grade and graduation are not dropouts. Some transfer to other school system or enlist in vocational programs. Counting such individuals as dropouts would overstate a district's attrition rate, at least when the students who transfer out of a school system outnumber the ones who transfer in.

Nevertheless, a cohort rate is a rough calculation of a student's chance of being successful in a particular school district. An adjustment could easily be made for students who transfer in and out of school districts. As for other school leavers--those who enter GED programs, for example--a school district would not be prejudiced if these individuals were counted as dropouts. In fact, such persons are dropouts--at least in the sense that they left a traditional high school program prior to graduation.

Conclusion

In spite of the common assumption that the nation's high school dropout rate is going down, the exact opposite may be true. On-time graduation rates in urban districts are unacceptably low, refuting claims that school reform efforts have been successful in the inner cities. Evidence abounds that school districts and even some

states are reporting inaccurate dropout information. A lack of standardized definitions and reporting procedures have contributed to the confusion.

Inadequate dropout information makes it difficult to evaluate school reform efforts or to compare one school district's education program with another. Understating the dropout problem, which is common in big city districts, has concealed the crisis in urban schools, where half or more of the students either drop out or graduate without basic skills.

African American school children are probably most harmed by inaccurate dropout information. It is in urban school systems, where a majority of African American children attend school, that the contrast between published dropout reports and reality is most stark. We are not likely to improve education outcomes for African American children until we accurately assess the urban dropout problem and address it like the crisis that it is.

One way to get better dropout information would be for all school districts to annually report the percentage of their 9th graders who graduate on time, adjusted only for those students who transfer in to the district after the 9th grade year and those who leave for other academic settings before graduation. Such a measurement would not be an exact count of dropouts, but it would provide a useful measure of assessing the chances of a specific cohort of 9th graders getting through high school on time. Certainly this measurement would provide a more accurate picture of a school system's success rate than the numbers that are being reported now.

Of course, addressing the dropout crisis involves more than designing a better student-tracking system. We need to develop better strategies for helping potential dropouts be successful. But assessing the scope of the dropout problem and admitting its true dimensions are necessary first steps.

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